

on the move

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North Carolina A&T State University
School of Agriculture and
Environmental Sciences
Newsletter
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Orange County aquaculture entrepreneur named Small Farmer of 2010



Joe Thompson is a former tobacco farmer who has revised his farm production focus to freshwater crustaceans.

A few years ago, Orange County farmer Joe Thompson found himself embedded in a pond, unable to get out. Water kept rising, yet somehow, miraculously, Thompson never sank any lower than his waist.

That incident turned out to be only a dream, but a powerful one that — with Thompson fearing his farming days were over — foreshadowed two valuable lessons. One, Thompson says, the dream was telling him that God would not let him sink; though Thompson worried how he would continue to earn a living, after a bad hip forced him to quit farming tobacco. Secondly, the water dream was a portent of his future.

Thompson's fate really did lie in ponds. In 2006, he began farming freshwater prawns, becoming only the second North Carolina farmer raising the shrimp-like crustaceans with the lobster-like flavor. He raised 950 pounds of prawns in one manmade pond

that first season, and is now happily constructing his third pond. He anticipates a harvest of 5,000 pounds this coming September.

For his resilience, resourcefulness and success with this venture, and for his abiding love of the farm career, Thompson, 61, is the 2010 Small Farmer of the Year for North Carolina. He was lauded with the title in ceremonies at A&T on March 24, during Small Farmers Appreciation Day, the highlight of the annual N.C. Small Farms Week sponsored by The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T. Thompson's accomplishments include: building the ponds on his farm with his own equipment and local help; remodeling an old tobacco barn into storage and freezer space; building a walk-in freezer out of used freezer panels; and designing a portable ice maker with a storage bin instead of buying ice.

His ingenuity has saved him more than \$50,000 as he refines his

prawn operation. He also grossed about another \$50,000 last year in prawn production and anticipates making as much or more this year as he adds the third pond. By 2011, says Thompson, he expects to have four ponds and 7,500 pounds of prawns.

"Mr. Thompson is smart, motivated and always looking for ways to improve his operation," says Mike Lanier, an area Extension Agent for agribusiness who nominated Thompson for the award. "He finds ways to get things done economically and is very resourceful."

Confident, outgoing, smart and plain spoken, Thompson loves farming. Born in northern Alamance County to a sharecropper, Thompson later tried to leave farming behind. He spent a few years in various manufacturing jobs — work that bored him, and environments he found distasteful. Then, as with so many reunited-with-the-land farmers, Thompson had a revelation.

"Something hit me in my head like a sledgehammer and said 'Boy, go buy you a farm,'" Thompson says.

He bought his spread in 1969 and still resides there, farming 57 acres of fruit and hogs; and also sorghum, soybeans and cotton seed, to enrich his prawn ponds. Thompson also leases 15 acres of his land to a tobacco farmer. Once a tobacco farmer himself, a wistful Thompson reminisces about how: "I had tobacco hanging like elephant ears on me; you talking

about beautiful" and how the bottom leaves of his tobacco stalks could command the same price as leaves.

But he was forced to give up the rigors of tobacco farming after he'd worn out his right hip and had it replaced before he was 50 — and twice more at 51. It was one of the few times in his life that Thompson was ever down. His son Eric told him to consider a new venture: prawns. The suggestion didn't go over well.

"I cussed him out," says Thompson, laughing at his own folly.

Eric persisted, and with his son talking him through it over the phone, Thompson searched the Internet for more information. Thompson then turned to Orange County Cooperative Extension for assistance, and credits retired Extension agent Karen McAdams for helping him get started. He also credits Lanier with showing him how to market, introducing him to restaurateurs who are now regular customers, and also credits A&T's Farmers Adopting Computer Technology program for training so he could use a computer independently.

"If it wasn't for them dog-gone Extension people, I wouldn't be nowhere," Thompson says.

The first prawn harvest in September 2006 netted him more than \$5,000 in one day. Thompson generously gives as good as he gets, helping other farmers get started raising prawns, even selling their harvests for them when they can't; opening his farm up for 4-H outings; and doing what he's always done: sharing his harvest with family, friends and neighbors.

SAES scientist named principal investigator for \$1.3 million USAID project

Southeast Asia has a friend in the SAES, which secured a second grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to assist farmers in that region learn conservation agriculture. Conservation agriculture combines cover crops, mulching and minimal tillage to conserve soil and increase yields. The grant was awarded to Dr. Manuel Reyes, who will be directing an international team to assist farmers in Cambodia and the Philippines in conservation agriculture for the next four years. Also on that team is Dr. Osei Yeboah, interim director of the SAES's International Trade Center, who will track the socio-economics of the project. The new grant is for \$1.3 million and will last until 2014.

Reyes, a hydrology and natural resources expert, has brought his skills to bear on the farming community in Southeast Asia for several years. This month, he completes a four-year agroforestry project in the region, which proved that vegetable farming is not only compatible with forestry, but, in certain combinations and configurations, actually improves yields of both trees and vegetables. Farmers, and women farmers in particular, learned new skills and are beginning to see increased income thanks to findings from the project, which also holds promise for soil conservation in the future.



Reyes

For the recently announced grant, Reyes will direct a project related to his agroforestry project that will introduce conservation agriculture in the region, and support will come from the same agency. Both projects are made possible through support from the Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resources Management Collaborative Research Support Program (SANREM CRSP) administered by Virginia Tech for USAID.

Findings from Reyes Southeast Asian projects are also translated into benefits to farmers in the United States. For instance, Reyes has brought irrigation technology learned from his agroforestry project to test on a farm in Montgomery County in North Carolina, and hopes to disseminate it widely to the farming community.



The 2010 Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmer of the Year, Joe Thompson (center) of Orange County, receives his plaque from Dr. Daniel Lyons Sr., a regional coordinator for the Cooperative Extension Program at A&T, at the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon on March 24. To Thompson's right on the dias is Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, associate dean and administrator for the Cooperative Extension Program at A&T.



Dr. Keith Baldwin, A&T Extension's program leader for agriculture and natural resources, opens the program at one of two Small Farms Week educational forums. The Tuesday Small Farms Week educational forum had four programs covering research into vegetable production. Programs in the Wednesday morning forum covered food safety and handling, and marketing farm commodities directly to consumers.

Small Farms Week Quotes

"This really goes to my family; that's who inspires me; that's who I work for."

Joe Thompson, upon being named the 2010 Small Farmer of the Year

"The reason it's so appropriate that we celebrate small farms in North Carolina is we're a small farm state."

Steve Troxler, N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture, at the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon

"Because this is a land-grant university, our definition of student is quite broad. It includes all of you who've taken advantage of Cooperative Extension. You're some of A&T's best and brightest."

Dr. Donald McDowell, Interim Dean, SAES, at the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon

"It's really amazing when you think about it, \$70 billion. That's how much is contributed to our state's economy each year by agriculture."

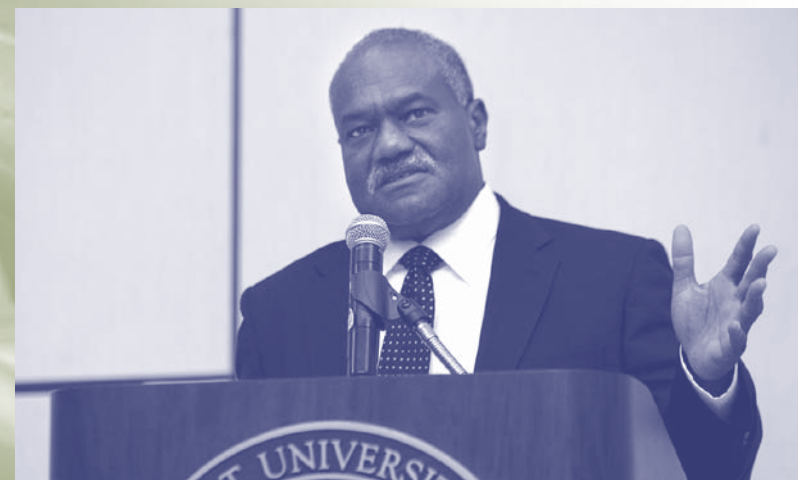
Steve Troxler, N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture, at the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon

"I wouldn't give you something that I wouldn't eat myself. I love my children and I wouldn't give your children something I wouldn't give mine."

John Council, 2009 Small Farmer of the Year, at the 2010 Small Farms Week Kickoff, on the quality of his products

"[The need for minorities to serve on USDA boards and committees] is like pulling teeth, but if you want good public policy, and you want service to improve, you're going to have to participate. You're going to have to help us."

Pearlie Reed, USDA Assistant Secretary for Administration, at the Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon



USDA's top management official, Pearlie Reed, delivered the keynote address at the 2010 Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon.



Newcomb

Dr. Elizabeth A. Newcomb has joined the Family and Consumer Sciences Department in the area of Fashion Merchandising and Design. Newcomb received her doctorate, master's, and undergraduate degrees in Textile Technology Management from N.C. State University's College of Textiles. While at N.C. State, she taught several classes in fashion development and product management. She has conducted research on a wide variety of topics focusing on the technical and consumer-related aspects of apparel sizing and fit. Her interests include the analysis of body measurement data of target markets, and the application of findings to product development processes to improve apparel fit for consumers with underserved needs.



Lovett

Dr. Mallorye Lovett has joined The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T as Nutrition Program outreach coordinator and EFNEP (Expanded Foods and Nutrition Education Program) coordinator. Lovett received her doctorate and a master's degree, in food sciences, from N. C. State University. She also has a master's in nutrition from UNC Greensboro and a bachelor's in food and nutrition from N.C. Central University. Lovett is a registered and licensed dietitian. As a member of Cooperative Extension's state-level staff, Lovett will provide leadership for statewide programming for nutrition education reaching families and youth with limited resources.



Owens

Courtney Owens has joined The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T as an Extension associate and coordinator for the FACT (Farmers Adopting Computer Technology) Program. Owens is an A&T alumnus who has the distinction of being the first graduate of the SAES's Master's International Program, which blends a year of graduate level coursework with two years

of Peace Corps service. Owens filled his Peace Corps service requirement in Burkina Faso, West Africa, where he worked as a small enterprise developer and also on agro-forestry and business skill initiatives.

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Dr. Donald McDowell, *Interim Dean, School of
Agriculture and Environmental Sciences*
Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, *Associate Dean,
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Richard Boylan, an A&T Extension agent specializing in alternative ag. in northwest N.C., was in Greensboro for an overview of research into high tunnel greenhouse production at the A&T University Farm. The program was one of the 2010 Small Farms Week educational activities.

mark your calendars:

- Installation of Chancellor
Harold L. Martin Sr. as A&T's 12th
Chancellor: Friday, April 23, 10 a.m.,
Corbett Sports Center.
- 2010 Research Apprenticeship
Program for High School Students:
June 20 – July 1.
- Department of Agribusiness,
Applied Economics and Agriscience
Food and Agribusiness Industries
Summer Program: July 18 – 23.

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